

FINALIST, 2022 ALEX ALBRIGHT CREATIVE NONFICTION PRIZE

Transmission Lines

by Lockie Hunter

At the dam, we jumped off the rusted trestle into Boone Lake and recited the same tired joke. "It's about dam time you jumped." My arms oaring, a skin of baby oil still sticking to my neck. We had been sitting on the dock all day, lazy, our bikini tops off, trying to avoid tan lines, drinking Miller Lite, listening to Hank Williams Junior's song "All My Rowdy Friends Are Coming Over Tonight." We covered ourselves in baby oil tinted with Tabasco, so that when we slathered it on, we already looked a little pink. The goal was to fry in the summer sun. A fishing pole was in the water, just in case we snagged the local-legend catfish, Big Ed or Big John or Big Ned. There was reportedly a huge prize (no one knew what the prize was. Gold? Jewelry? 8-track songs? A year's supply of Hawaiian Tropic?) Given by whom exactly (the mayor? The Tennessee Valley Authority?) Nonetheless, no one I knew ever sat on a dock without putting in a pole for Big Ed/John/Ned.

In 1948, the TVA flooded the town of Butler, Tennessee. The government paid to relocate people, churches, homes . . . 1,281 graves. TVA created Watauga Lake with a dam that would generate electricity for the residents of East Tennessee.

"The next mayor of Butler will be a catfish," said a local.

The transmission lines chewed through the mountains of my hometown in East Tennessee.

"Your uncle ruined your view," my mother said.

My uncle worked for the TVA. Their transmission lines stretched upward in a "V," aching for the sky. The TVA was a New Deal program, the goal to provide jobs and electricity to the rural Tennessee River Valley. It displaced thousands of people in the process.

North Carolina photographer Micah Cash took a photo of the Boone Dam and noted that it "illustrates the interaction of landscape, utility, and community while contemplating the visual and cultural compromises we make as a society for the necessity of electricity."



ABOVE Boone Dam, Recreation Area, from the book *Dangerous Waters: A Photo Essay on the Tennessee Valley Authority* (University of Tennessee Press, 2017) by Micah Cash

There are no rusted trestles to jump from in the lost town of Butler, but there is the Butler Memorial Bridge, a three-span deck truss bridge over the Watauga River on State Highway 67. It won an award from the American Institute of Steel Construction for the beauty of its metal, patina-green, mesh-lace, at once solid and delicate. If I were a composer of country songs, I'd create a verse for it. *All my rowdy friends are jumping off Watauga Bridge tonight.*

Eighty feet high. I stared hard at the water. If I could launch high enough and land toes-first on the water, bruise my heel and *sink sink sink*, would the momentum convey me deep enough to touch the town's history? I'm afraid to dive too deep, impale my foot on the church steeple of a congregation that was not important enough to save.

Inundated. The technical term for flooding a town is *inundated*.

As in, Butler was inundated by a TVA reservoir.

As in, we are inundated with news about the virus.

As in, we waited for hours to speak to someone on the inundated unemployment helpline.

As in, Trump inundated the media with quack ideas about injecting Lysol as a cure.

As in, New York City is inundated with requests for ventilators.

As in, before she died, her lungs were inundated with fluid.

As in, the town in which I live, Asheville, was once inundated with tourists, but is now deserted.

The world has a watery feel to it now. When we do go out, we wear a mask.

The town of Butler is still there. It is the people who have moved on.

Does Butler still have a zip code?

Perhaps the mayor is Big Ed the Catfish.

In 1983, the lake was drained to make critical repairs to Watauga Dam. The technical term is *drawdown*.

As in, draw the water down-away.

As in, draw the water down into the soggy earth.

As in, draw the water into another container, one that does not harbor a once-town.

"If I could launch high enough and land toes-first on the water, bruise my heel and *sink sink sink*, would the momentum convey me deep enough to touch the town's history? I'm afraid to dive too deep, impale my foot on the church steeple of a congregation that was not important enough to save."



As in, draw quick conclusions about which churches needed saving.

As in draw down your arms and hands. No bugs allowed. Allow a six-foot distance.

As in draw down your expectations of seeing your first grandchild in person.

As in, draw a picture of the town that only resides in your memory.

The water drained and visitors could view the ghost town. Thresholds of homes, tumbling chimneys, dead trees.

"It was like a year-long funeral," one resident said of the relocation.

If we define a town as a collection of buildings, is it no longer a town when the buildings are submerged? If we define a town as its community, then is the town of Butler still alive in its citizens, now scattered? What of the Atlantises of the world? There are many TVA once-towns. Their names all begin with "The lost town of . . ."

When does a town stop being a town?

If we define a church as a congregation, then is Grace Church in North Asheville still a church? The church bells still ring every Sunday, the sound bouncing off the pews, empty because of the virus.

STEPHANIE WHITLOCK DICKEN, who designed this essay, began work with NCLR's with the 2001 issue, then served as Art Director 2002-2008.



"If we define a town as a collection of buildings, is it no longer a town when the buildings are submerged?"

What of the empty stores in Manhattan? Michael Hendrix writes in the *New York Daily News* that "New York City is not dead, but it is on life support." Support is a good place to be, where the hand is lifted, the heart is lifted. Support lifts, we stand taller on supports, like a juggler on stilts. I remember the mountains supporting the powerlines, or was it the powerlines that supported the mountains? We could view it either way.

The world has a watery feel to it now.

When we do go out, we wear a mask.

During the Butler drawdown, new artifacts were discovered, not belonging to the original era. Objects (old boots, lace panties, underwire bras, rusted gas cans) thrown over the bridge into the welcoming embrace of the once-town. There was rumor that there was a body down there. A spectral visitor to the tunnels of murky streets. The body sinking to the bottom, craving his post-office, his barber shop, his favorite meat-and-three restaurant, his seat in the family pew of the church. He once sat right up front, where the voice of the ghostly preacher rang out, loud and true. So close he could see the preacher's fillings.

The once-resident frequenting the watery shops.

The first to walk those paths in more than forty years.

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LOCKIE HUNTER had three essays make it to the final round of consideration for the 2022 Alex Albright Creative Nonfiction Prize. Read the other two in *NCLR Online* Fall 2022 and Winter 2023. The author serves as associate producer of the poetry and prose radio program *Wordplay* on 103.3 FM in Asheville.

Sometimes, when the water level dips very low, I am sure I can see that church steeple. A knife-stab of white triangle, rising out of the water, like the sword in the stone. If a local teen can just grab it, pull it from the watery depths, they will be king.

A modern-day Excalibur, the Lady in the Lake sirening to the new King of Butler.

Will the King sit with the Butler community on the water-logged pews at the church, will the footsteps in the main square ring out again, with muffled, watery babbles?

Artist Jason deCaires Taylor created a collection of sculptures based on people that live in Puerto Morelos. They are in the midst of everyday activities: watching TV, driving a car. He buried these people in the Caribbean, and now, fish swim in and out of their ears, their open mouths. I imagine it is the same in Butler. Schools of fish occupying the K-12 building, haunting the classroom with their quiet rhythm.

Taylor titled his installation, *The Silent Evolution*.

They call it the *Lost Town* of Butler. This implies it is people who create a town, not the edifices. The people of Butler have moved on.

There is no rickety trestle. Only an eighty-foot plunge to jump into the town. No real danger of impaling my foot on the church steeple. It is too far regressed.

There are few people in Asheville now. The downtown streets are deserted. Pandemic has sent people into their homes; the restaurants are shattered/shuttered/ghost-inhabited. The church bells ring, but they feel hollow.

Is our town lost?

Are others?

The world has a watery feel to it. When we do go out, we wear a mask.

It feels, instead, as if our town is not lost like Atlantis but suspended like Butler. The buildings waiting for their inhabitants to come home. The shuttered shops deferred.

In many ways, we are all swimming, untethered, hoping when this is over, our town will re-emerge. ■

She holds an MFA in creative writing from Emerson College in Boston and has taught creative writing at Warren Wilson College. Her work has appeared in a variety of periodicals, like *Brevity*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, and *Blue Mountain Review*.